

CHEAP REPOSITORY.

SUNDAY READING.

ANANIAS and SAPPHIRA.



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CHATELAIN'S HISTORY

THE HISTORY OF THE

REIGN OF

CHARLES THE FIRST



BY

JOHN CHATELAIN

OF THE

UNIVERSITY OF

OXFORD

PRINTED

BY

JOHN CHATELAIN

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Ananias and Sapphira.

WHAT a blessed picture does the sacred Scriptures give us, of the brotherly love and holy union in which the Apostles, and the numerous disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ lived after his Ascension! "And the multitude of them that believed were of one soul; neither said any of them that ought of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common, neither were there any among them that lacked, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the Apostles' feet, and distribution was made unto every man as he had need."

We are not, however, to suppose, that this blessed congregation existed without that degree of subordination which is necessary to keep order in every state. The Apostles were looked up to as spiritual rulers, and we read, that "Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas, a Proselyte of Antioch, were appointed to watch over the temporal concerns of the brethren." But how beautiful is the description given of the harmony and brotherly love in which they all lived! Nothing less

than the power of Christ operating on the soul, and meliorating all its evil affections, could have produced on earth a state so nearly approaching the purity of a heavenly one.

In our intercourse with the world, we find, in general such a selfish spirit prevail among men, that we seldom see this friendly union subsist even among brethren of the same family; a thousand little mean jealousies arise: each has a separate interest, and thus the peace of families is destroyed, and strife and dissention takes the place of charity and love. Then how imperfectly do we perform the duties we owe our neighbour! We are enjoined to love him as ourselves, but, alas! so far from measuring his wants by our own, immersed in business or pleasure, we seldom find time to inquire into his concerns, or inquire only with a view to gratify our curiosity, and listen to his grievances with a cold apathy, little formed to bring forth those fruits of kindness and charity which is every where enforced by the precepts and example of our Lord.

How different is this to that spirit of love which reigned among the first converts to christianity: each was ready to administer to the wants of his brother; the rich freely distributed food and raiment to the poor, and they who subsisted by their labour, did not murmur that a part of their earnings went to comfort a sick or infirm brother, but rejoiced, and ate their bread in singleness of heart, giving God thanks. Each loved his neighbour as himself; there was no grudging, no envying, no backbiting, no reviling, all was charity and love. And so it is still among all true Christians; for though, as a pious writer observes, many years did not pass after the age of the Apostles before Satan

and self got footing in the church, yet this one heart and one spirit, which then first appeared in the Jerusalem church, is that one heart and spirit of divine love to which all are called that would be true disciples of Christ, and, therefore, every true Christian ought, and will, make it his great care and prayer to have it restored in himself, and then he will be as truly a member of the first heavenly church at Jerusalem as if he had lived in the days of the Apostles.

"God is love," saith the Apostle James, "and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him:" as much as to say, that all those heavenly tempers of meekness, humility, charity, forbearance, patience, hope, faith, holy confidence, and resignation, must naturally proceed from the heart which God hath sanctified; for his Holy Spirit cannot unite with pride, anger, hardness of heart, vain glory, and all those vile affections which fit us only to dwell with the devil and his angels: our hearts must be purified from these if we wish them to be made blessed temples for the Spirit of the God of all mercies to dwell in.

"If," says the Apostle, "we do not love our brother whom we have seen, how can we love God whom we have not seen." It may be asked by those whose situation in life is so humble that they with difficulty supply the wants of their own families, perhaps numerous ones, how, having nothing to bestow, they are to shew this love to their neighbour, which forms so essential a part of the christian faith, I answer, that where that love here spoken of abideth in the heart it will find means of manifesting itself.

More is not required of us than we are able to

perform; if we have the will, that no doubt is as acceptable in the eye of a just and merciful God, where the means are denied. But human life is so replete with evil, and we stand mutually so much in need of each other's assistance in various ways, that I will venture to affirm, scarcely a day passes in which opportunities, if we seek them, do not occur, in which every Christian, be his station in life what it will, may shew his love to his neighbour.

Methinks I see a poor man visiting his neighbour equally poor with himself, under the pressure of some recent calamity of sickness, or otherwise: I see him listen to the detail of his calamities, with a heart melting with compassion and brotherly kindness: I hear him condole with him, comfort him, point out to him the most probable means of relief, and encourage him to put trust and confidence in the mercy of God, by the relation of some similar calamity, out of which he had been unexpectedly helped by his divine interference. In his way home the cries of a strayed infant draw his attention, he speaks to it kindly, and finding it a wanderer from home, carries it to his little cot, lets it partake with his own children, in the evening when he returns from work, diligently inquires out the parents, and restores it to their distracted bosoms. In short, numerous are the instances which daily occur, in which the poor as well as the rich may manifest that they have the love of Christ abiding in their hearts, by kindness they shew to their poor brethren and fellow pilgrims. For it is his commandment that we should love one another. "He that loveth not his brother," saith St. John, "abideth in death. He that saith he is in light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness. He that loveth his brother abideth in the light:"—and far-

ther, " whoſo hath this world's goods, and ſeeth his brother have need, and ſhuteth up his bowels of compaſſion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?" But I will now return to my ſubject.

Notwithſtanding the bleſſed union and purity in which the diſciples of our Lord lived, under the eye of his apoſtles, ſuch is the corrupt ſtate of human nature, that even in thoſe times, even in that bleſſed aſſembly, Satan tempted ſome among them to evil. Tares grew among the wheat. We are told, that a " man named Ananias, and his wife Sapphira, ſold a poſſeſſion and kept back part of the money, his wife being privy to it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the Apoſtles' feet. What was the deſign of theſe people in this preſumptuous fraud? Did Ananias entertain the abſurd hope of deceiving the Apoſtle, and making him believe that the love of God operated ſo ſtrongly on his heart, that the world had loſt all power over it, that Satan had loſt all his ſtrong holds, while he was in reality faſt bound in his chains. Yes, ſuch was his infatuation, that notwithſtanding the repeated miracles he had without doubt ſeen performed by the Apoſtles, and which muſt have convinced him of their immediate communication with the Deity, he was, I ſay, ſo infatuated as to believe that his vile tranſaction could eſcape the all-ſeeing eye of the Deity, and the reprehension of his Prophet. Ananias and Sapphira wiſhed to be thought holy and devout perſons, while, in reality, their conduct proved how far they were removed from that purity which they wiſhed to affect. They would have ſerved God and Mammon; a thing which our Lord had declared to be impoſſible. " No man," ſaid the

holy Jesus, "can serve two masters, for either he will love the one and hate the other: ye cannot serve God and Mammon."

But Satan had, as he is too often wont to do, but too successfully spread his net for Ananias and Sapphira; the honor and esteem of men, seemed more estimable in their eyes than the love of God, for it appears, that they were not less tempted from the principle of vain glory than of covetousness. For though we are told, that many sold their land, and brought the produce and laid it at the Apostles' feet, to distribute to every one as he had need, this was a sacrifice entirely voluntary, not exacted by the Apostles, and wholly sprung from the abundant love of Christ dwelling in their hearts, and subduing all things to itself. The sacrifice of his land was not, therefore, required of Ananias, it was entirely at his own disposal, as we are fully informed by the reply of the Apostle.

Peter, said, "Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land. Whilst it remained was it not thine own? and after it was sold was it not in thine own power, why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart and lied unto God?"

Ananias therefore, might have withheld his land, he might have disposed of it how he would in any just or honourable way, without the interference of any one. He wished to purchase with it a character for sanctity and holiness, but the covetousness of his mind would not suffer him to admit his brethren to share equally with him the good things which God had bestowed on him, he had recourse, therefore, to deceit and cunning, and unwilling to give up the whole, resolved at least

secret a parti Perhaps it is but charitable to suppose that Ananias in the first instance was sincere in what he proposed, and really meant to give the produce of his land to be distributed by the apostle, I but that afterward, when he came to reflect on what he had done, and began to compute the value of the estate, and to find how much money it would produce, avarice took possession of his soul, and suggested to him the impious fraud. We may imagine him upon this subject conversing thus with his wife.

ANANIAS.

ANANIAS.

Methinks I repent of what I have done: when I consider how large a sum the land I have this morning sold has brought, and when it comes to be distributed how small a proportion of it will return to me its rightful owner, I could almost repent that I so hastily made the proposition to our apostle.

SAPPHIRA.

Indeed I cannot see that such a sacrifice is necessary; why should our substance go to support others? It is true I would do much for our fellow labourers in Christ's vineyard, but still charity should begin at home.

ANANIAS.

Your sentiments entirely coincide with mine, every one should take care of his own temporal as well as spiritual interest. Though we know we are not to live in this world for ever, yet we shall, least it is most likely, live in it many years, and want

many comforts which this money would afford us.

S A P P H I R A.

Were I in your place, dear husband, I would certainly keep it for my own use. It is now in your power, and when you have once given it out of your hands it will be distributed, and you cannot recall it, therefore consider well before it be too late.

A N A N I A S.

I am strongly inclined to follow your advice and keep the money, which is certainly more justly ours than any other person's; but then, Sapphira, consider, we shall no longer be looked upon by our brethren as the holy sanctified persons they think us, though many have, you well know, sold their lands that the money they produced might administer to the necessities of the brethren; these will therefore be held in higher estimation than we, and be looked upon more abundantly to partake of the favour and grace of God.

S A P P H I R A.

I feel it in the same manner that you do, but is there no remedy, must we part with all?

A N A N I A S.

I have been thinking whether we may not venture to secret a part.

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S A P P H I R A.

Without doubt we may: who will think of enquiring into the price for which we have sold the land of any but ourselves, and we shall know how to answer.

A N A N I A S.

True, we must be both in a story. I am resolved to keep back a part for our own use; we shall probably live to be old, and this money, as I said before, will purchase for us many comforts which we shall then stand in need of.

This, or some such conversation we may naturally suppose to have passed, between Ananias and Sapphira, upon the subject of their iniquity.

What a dreadful vice is hypocrisy! rather than lose the esteem and approbation of men, they feared not to expose themselves to the vengeance of a just God, whose presence they offended by the most impious deception, the most presumptuous falsehood. Among the catalogue of vices to which we fallen miserable creatures are heirs, there is not one more severely reprov'd by our Lord than hypocrisy, "Woe unto you Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and all uncleanness; even so also ye outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity." Again, "when thou prayest thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are, for they pray standing in the synagogues and corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto

you they have their reward;" as much as to say, their desire is to gain the esteem of men; they seek that, and that is their reward; they do not seek to please God, neither will God bestow on them those rewards which he has reserved for those who worship him in truth and spirit. But then adds our Lord, "when thou prayest enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy father which is in secret, and thy father which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly."

We should be very careful not to set too high a value on the opinions of men, the praise of good people is certainly grateful, where our conscience bears testimony that we have obtained it by walking humbly before our God, and by living conformably to those holy precepts laid down by our Lord Jesus Christ; but we should beware of making this the first principle of our actions, lest, like Ananias and Sapphira, Satan tempt us to prefer the esteem of men to the approbation of God and our own consciences, and like them we become hypocrites, attending to the outward forms of religion, merely to establish in the world a character for sanctity and holiness which we do not deserve. How horrid, how presumptuous is such a mockery of the Divine Being! who seeth the most secret thoughts, and who requires us to worship him "in spirit and in truth!" Ought we not continually to lift up our hearts to the God of all mercies for grace to resist the great enemy of mankind, who goeth about seeking whom he may devour, and can excite such impious thoughts even in the heart of a believer, one too who was witness of the miracles wrought by Christ through his Apostles.

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But odious as this vice of hypocrisy is, let us not, by striving to avoid it, or rather the appearance of it, fall into the opposite extreme, I mean negligence in the performance of our religious duties, and fear of confessing our faith before men. "Let your light," says our Saviour, "so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." It is not uncommon for the wicked, the licentious, those who live as if they were wholly independent of the God who created them, and who daily dispenses his blessings to them in common with the rest of his creatures, to brand with the name of hypocrites or enthusiasts all those who, acting upon principles more worthy, rational, and dependent creatures, attend regularly the public ordinances of God, and endeavour to make his law the rule of their lives. But let not such be deterred from their duties by these slanderers, nor fear being justified even in the eye of the world: There is so much difference between ostentation and true piety, that it cannot be mistaken by any but those who, to gratify their malignity, are wilfully blind.

"Every tree," says our Lord, "is known by its fruit; can a man gather grapes off thorns or figs off thistles? a good tree bringeth forth good fruit and an evil tree evil fruit." When we see a man every Sunday regularly attend church, constantly present at the Sacrament, and yet see him guilty of extortion, fornication, drunkenness, lasciviousness, or lying; when we see him avaricious, hard-hearted, wholly averse to acts of charity and kindness, we may venture to pronounce such a one a hypocrite; and that he frequents the church merely with the view of gaining the good

opinion of men, thereby to advance his own worldly interest; unless we can suppose him to be so blind as to believe, that the outward forms of religion can avail any thing, without the fruits of holiness, charity, and love. On the contrary where we find those blessed fruits, united with an attention to these institutions established by our Lord for the confirmation of our faith, or a medium of communication with him, and however reviled by the tongues of the wicked, such a one cannot fail of possessing the esteem of all good men, as a faithful servant of the living God.

But I will now hasten to the melancholy conclusion of the history that has given rise to this digression.

The Scripture informs, us that Ananias was no sooner accused by Peter of the sin he had committed, than he was instantly struck dead, an awful example to the by-standers, and to all succeeding generations, of the vengeance of God against hypocrites and liars! "And Ananias hearing these words" (the words which Peter had before spoken to him) "fell down and gave up the ghost; and fear came upon all that heard these things. And the young men arose, wound him up" (in his winding sheet) "and carried him out and buried him."

Well indeed might fear come upon all who heard these things, every one, no doubt, naturally turned their eyes inward, to see whether he could not perceive in his own heart the seeds of some vice which might hereafter subject him to the same judgment. But this awful example did not end here; we are informed, that about the space of three hours after Ananias's wife, not knowing what was done, came in, "And Peter said unto her, Tell

me whether ye sold the land for so much? and he said yea, for so much. Then Peter said unto her, how is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? Behold the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door, and shall carry thee out. Then fell she down straightway at his feet, and yielded up the Ghost, and the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her forth, buried her by her husband."

How dreadful to be thus instantaneously summoned into the presence of her Creator with a falsehood on her lips! And do we not incur the same danger every time we utter a falsehood? We are told in Holy Writ, that a lie is an abomination to God, and that liars have their place with the devil and his angels, and yet few of us take warning by it, and hold a falsehood in that just abhorrence in which the Scripture speaks of it; many who would blush to be thought guilty of theft, do not scruple to tempt God by a vice against which he has denounced judgments equally severe. A lie is constantly had recourse to upon the most trifling occasions, and often uttered from mere wantonness. What can be the cause of this strange depravity? Is it that we presume on the mercy and long-suffering of God, who has borne with our iniquity, and not yet made us monuments of his displeasure? Let us not be too secure God is merciful, but we must not forget that a lie is his abomination. Ananias and Sapphira little thought, when they projected the falsehood for which they died, that they should so soon be summoned into the presence of their Creator to answer for it. It was not probably the first lie they had told, and

(36)
they might, with as much reason as we, presume
on the mercy of the God, whose judgements, he-
vertheless, overtook them. Let us not, therefore,
blindfold on the brink of a precipice, flatter our-
selves that we are in safety, but seriously con-
sider that every species of falsehood is sin, and that
if we escape punishment in this life we cannot
the next: let us repent while time is allowed us
nor reject the mercy of God, who would that we
should all be saved, and affords us ample opportunity
if we are but willing to embrace it: even the
wretched Sapphira might, perhaps, have averted
her fate had she improved the moment of grace
offered her; for we find that the Apostle said
her, "Tell me whether ye sold the land for
much?" Had therefore her heart smote her, had
she seized the moment of reflection granted her
and, falling at the feet of the Apostle, confessed
her own and her husband's iniquity, and implored
mercy, perhaps, great as her sin was, the Lord
might have pardoned it; but, hardened in her in-
iquity, far from discovering any compunction, she
replied, "Yea, for so much," and was instantly
struck dead.

Let us profit from this awful example and by
forsaking our evil courses, while the mercy of God
permits us the time to do so, prove ourselves worthy
of being called the disciples of our Lord Jesus
Christ.

THE END.